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Principles of Effective Offender Rehabilitation

Research summary
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Question

What are the characteristics of effective offender treatment?

Background

Assisting offenders to become prosocial citizens has been a preoccupation of criminologists, psychologists, psychiatrists and other related professionals for over a century. Efforts to reduce re-offending and increase prosocial behaviour are located mainly in the criminal justice system and the success in achieving these two goals has been elusive.

For a period (approximately from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s) many researchers and practitioners held the belief that little could be done to rehabilitate offenders. However, the 1990s saw a flood of new research and analysis that yielded a much more optimistic view of the effectiveness of some treatments to change the behaviour of offenders towards more prosocial behaviours.

Method

A number of meta-analytic reviews of the offender treatment literature have been conducted that reveal patterns in what makes some treatment programs more effective than others. Meta-analyses of the treatment literature compile and compare many studies to provide an overall estimate of the effectiveness of treatment. The first major meta-analytic review of this literature was conducted in 1990 and since then there have been over 40 such reviews. In general, the reviews identify the characteristics of treatment that reduce recidivism.

Answer

Currently, researchers have identified 19 characteristics or principles that are found to be associated with reductions in re-offending. Some of these principles are overarching principles that set the general human values and theoretical context to effective intervention (e.g., provide services rather than relying on punishment to change behaviour). Other principles relate to offender risk assessment, program delivery, and organizational factors. However, it appears that there are three principles at the core of effective intervention with offenders.

The first principle is called the Risk Principle and states that in order to increase treatment effectiveness the level of service must be matched to the risk level of the offender (i.e., low risk offenders receive minimal intervention and high risk offenders receive intensive services). The

second principle, the Need Principle, says that treatment should target those problematic needs of offenders that are actually related to offending (i.e., criminogenic needs). And finally, the Responsivity Principle calls for providing cognitive behavioural treatment and to tailor the intervention to the learning style, motivation, abilities and strengths of the offender.

When treatment programs adhere to all three principles there is a significant impact on recidivism. Offenders receiving treatment in residential or custodial settings show lower recidivism rates than offenders who do not receive treatment. When the treatment is delivered in community settings the effectiveness of the intervention is even greater.

Finally, the reviews also reveal a gap in effectiveness between the controlled, experimental settings and the "real world" interventions. This is most likely due to the varied levels of quality and integrity of service delivery in the everyday situation.

Policy implications

1. Providing human services to offenders shows reductions in recidivism demonstrating that offender rehabilitation can be an effective approach to enhancing community safety.
2. The treatment interventions that are offered to offenders should follow the principles of Risk, Need and Responsivity.
3. In order to deliver the most effective interventions in real world settings, considerable care should be given to selecting, training and supervising staff.

Source

- Bonta, J. & Andrews, D. A. (2007). *Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation*. (User Report No. 2007-06). Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

For further information

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